

ELL Team Report: 2006-07
Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant
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Iowa Educators' and Administrators' Immersion Experience May 2007

Remarks Prepared by Katherine Richardson Bruna

Over the period of May 1-5th, 2007, a team of 11 Iowa educational professionals, including administrators, superintendents, and professors, traveled to Villachuato, Michoacán, México as part of an immersion experience funded by TQELL monies. The purpose of the trip was to familiarize these education professionals more intimately and immediately with the challenges Mexican English Language Learner (ELL) students face when they arrive in Iowa classrooms. Through experiencing life in a small, poor, rural Mexican community representative of those from which many Iowa immigrants come, the intended outcome is that these professionals will return to their positions ready to design, engage in, and support more effective professional development endeavors with their district and school colleagues that reflect this newfound knowledge.

Family-hosted lodging and meals as well as visits to both the elementary and middle school in Villachuato ensured that participants gained these insights into the informal (family and community) and formal (school) educational contexts from which Mexican immigrants to Iowa come, while also providing a level of culture and language shock that simulated, in some measure, that experienced by new arrivals.

The extent to which the immersion experience achieved its intended outcomes is the subject of research by trip facilitator, Katherine Richardson Bruna, an Assistant Professor of Multicultural and International Curriculum Studies at ISU. Pre- and post-trip reflective discussions and writings, as well as daily debriefs in the field, accompanied by still and video footage of participation, is being used to compile an account of impact. Follow-up interviews with participants 6-12 months after the trip will supplement that account with stories of how the impact of the experience has been translated into action.

Emergent evidence already attests to the fact that participants are putting their newly-acquired insights into play in a professional capacity. For example, one Superintendent wrote in his post-trip reflection about the insights he gained through the trip:

Although I had respect for immigrant families prior to the trip, I now have even more for them. The main goal of life and coming to the USA is survival. In the quest for survival, much strain is placed on the family. Often family members do not see each other for years. Also because of the need for survival issues to be taken care of first, I now have a better understanding of why students may miss school or arrive late. It is not that education is not a priority. Rather, education is just not the top priority. Family is.

In further reflecting on the experience, this participant explained what he learned about what it must be like to not speak the language of instruction:

It is so difficult to describe what it is like to be placed in a situation in which a language barrier exists. I am not sure if I would have learned anything from the trip if others were not present who could speak the language. Thus I will now have [more] understanding of the difficulties for immigrant students.

An unsolicited email from a teacher in this superintendent's district suggests that he is not just reflecting, but acting on these insights. She writes:

Just a personal testimonial here regarding your help with the recent trip of administrators to Villachuato—my superintendent was along with your group. He spoke to my Spanish II class on Friday, showing photos of the trip. He certainly did a good job with the students. I was especially impressed with him when he shared a bit of a personal confession that he had not always been very understanding of the students and their struggles with English. He noted that since being put in that situation himself in Villachuato his eyes were opened to the difficulty of wanting to communicate, but not being able to. He stated that he would be reiterating that point to the faculty in the opening meetings in August as he guessed that there are some teachers who don't "get it" in regard to ESL students. He will be speaking to the school board tomorrow and I hope to be able to hear him.

In summary, this immersion experience and the future trip in September stand to powerfully educate Iowa educators about the challenges and opportunities brought by increased Mexico-Iowa immigration by letting the immigrants themselves—in this case, the community places and family and school spaces of Villachuato, do the teaching.

Respectfully submitted,

Carmen Sosa
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